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# MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES

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## VOWEL ALLITERATION IN MODERN POETRY

Modern vowel alliteration seems as yet not to have received the attention it deserves. Some prosodists take so narrow a view of it as virtually to exclude the most effective examples; others look upon it askance as of doubtful prosodic value; and still others deny its very existence. I shall cite a few opinions. E. S. Dallas, in a much-quoted article on alliteration contributed to the ninth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (reprinted unrevised, uncorrected, and inconsiderably augmented in the eleventh edition), asserts that "alliteration is never effective unless it runs upon consonants." Schipper (*History of English Versification*, p. 14) says that the "harmony or consonance of the unlike vowels is hardly perceptible in modern English and does not count as an alliteration." Classen, in his recent work, *Vowel Alliteration in the Old Germanic Languages* (p. 41), says that "in modern English, vowel alliteration appears to have reached the stage of alliteration for the eye, as in such a phrase as 'Apt alliteration's artful aid.'" I add to these opinions a characteristic passage from Professor Saintsbury's *History of English Prosody* (pp. 396-397):

"Alliteration, to be genuine and effective, must, as it seems to me, rest upon consonants, just as rhyme must (again as it seems to me) rest upon vowels. The old vowel alliteration was an obvious 'easement' when the thing *had* to be done at any cost, and it may have had attractions in Anglo-Saxon which we do not appreciate now. But the rapid desertion of it in Middle English, and its almost total failure to appear in Modern, would seem to show that it has no real reason of being now. Before writing this, and in order not to trust too much to a general memory, I have looked over many pages of Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, and Tennyson, the four poets most likely to have used the effect consciously or unconsciously, if it exists. I find few traces of it at all, and none that seem to have any particular lesson for us. Even

so strong an instance of identical vowel alliteration (and it need not, as most people know, be identical) as

Of old Olympus (P. L., vii, 7),

does not, to my ear at least, produce any special effect, good or bad: one neither welcomes it nor wishes it away. In the great line of Oenone—

Idalian Aphrodite beautiful—

there may seem, at first hearing, to be something gained by the vowel alliteration; but a very little reflection will, I think, show that the harmony in contrast of the two initial syllables is quite independent of their having no consonant before them, that it is, in fact, a case of 'Vowel Music' (as I call it below), not of alliteration at all."

I have quoted Professor Saintsbury at this length not only because he illustrates in one way the comment I have made upon students of prosody, but also because the passage furnishes me by opposition the theses of my paper. I wish, that is, to show (1) that alliteration may be as genuine and effective when it rests upon vowels as when it rests upon consonants; (2) that it is a phenomenon distinct from vowel music, or vowel melody, though like consonant alliteration always conjoined with it; (3) that it is fairly common in modern poetry, particularly in Milton and Tennyson. And incidentally I wish to ascertain what it is in modern vowel alliteration that constitutes the alliterating element.

I shall begin with some simple instances. It may first be noted that many familiar phrases derive their idiomatic force from what seems to be vowel alliteration; thus, "ins and outs," "upward and onward," "odds and ends," "odd and even," "andy over," "off and on," "up and at 'em," "ifs and ans," "give an inch and take an ell," "from Alfred to Omaha" (a popular perversion of "from Alpha to Omega"). The title of Poe's story "The Angel of the Odd" derives a part of its oddity from the alliteration of the vowels. Allen Upward seems as alliterative as Simple Simon. Nine persons out of ten, asked abruptly for an instance of alliteration of any kind, will respond by quot-

ing Churchill's line, "Apt alliteration's artful aid," and perhaps the tenth will recall "An Austrian army awfully arrayed." In all of these cases the curious and significant thing is that the words with initial vowels seem (at any rate to my ear) actually to alliterate. When I say to myself, "Apt alliteration's artful aid," I am sensible not only of changes in the quality of the vowels, but also of the repetition of an initial effect quite as characteristic as that of the initial consonants in "Boldly by battery besieged Belgrade," or "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers." The alliteration, in other words, even in this rather cheap form, seems to be both genuine and effective.<sup>1</sup>

Nor when we pass to higher forms of expression does vowel alliteration seem to lose its value. Of the four poets mentioned by Professor Saintsbury I have examined for the purposes of this paper only Milton and Tennyson. These poets, whose fondness for consonantal alliteration is at all times marked and frequently is excessive, seem to me to be equally, or proportionately, fond of alliteration by vowels. Of the 10,565 lines of *Paradise Lost*, 670, or 6.2%, contain each two or more accented alliterating vowels. Of lines which show vowel alliteration, but in which one of the initial vowels is unaccented, there are in the whole poem 517. The total number of internally alliterating lines is, therefore, 1187, or 11.2% of the whole. The following are examples, the alliterating vowels in a single line varying from two to five:

- (2 vowels) Of warriors old with order'd spear and shield. (i, 565.)  
 (3 vowels) Author and end of all things, and from work. (vii, 591.)  
 Me, me only, just object of his ire. (x, 936.)  
 (4 vowels) Where entrance up from Eden easiest climbs. (xi, 119.)  
 I also erred in overmuch admiring. (ix, 1078.)

<sup>1</sup> It is, of course, impossible to compel any one, except by process of torture, and not always then, to say that he recognizes a mooted prosodic force or element if he wishes to withhold his assent. All that can be done in any case is to set forth one's own reactions and see to what extent they agree with the experiences of others.

(5 vowels) O Eve, in evil hour thou did'st give ear. (ix, 1067.)

The angel ended, and in Adam's ear. (viii, 1.)

Cases in which the alliterating words are in successive lines instead of in the same line are naturally much more numerous. Thus in Book I, the number of lines that contain an effective initial vowel that alliterates with an effective vowel in a preceding or following line, is 223 in a total of 798 lines. I quote a few examples at random:

Hung on his shoulders like the moon, whose orb  
 Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views  
 At evening. (i, 287-8.)

And gentle airs due at this hour  
 To fan the earth, now waked, and usher in  
 The evening cool.

Will he so wise let loose at once his ire,  
 Belike through impotence or unaware,  
 To give his enemies their wish, and end  
 Them in his anger whom his anger saves  
 To punish endless. (ii, 156.)

The following table shows the number of lines in *Paradise Lost* that have vowel alliteration within the line. Under A is given the number of lines that have two or more accented alliterations, under B the number of lines that have one accented alliteration and one or more unaccented.<sup>2</sup>

Book	Number of Lines	Percent.		Percent.	
		A	B	A	B
I	798	52	38	6.5	4.7
II	1055	58	55	5.4	5.2
III	742	42	43	5.6	5.7
IV	1015	72	38	7.0	3.7
V	907	55	46	6.0	4.9
VI	912	50	55	5.4	6.0
VII	640	34	32	5.3	5.0
VIII	653	47	32	7.1	4.9
IX	1189	95	58	7.9	4.8
X	1104	65	54	5.8	4.9
XI	901	65	38	7.2	4.2
XII	649	35	28	5.4	4.3
	10565	670	517	6.2	4.8

<sup>2</sup> Of consonantal alliterations, the number in Book I, reckoned in the same way, is as follows: A, 161; B, 22; percentage of A-alliterations, 20; percentage of B-alliterations, 2.7.

Tennyson, although he employs vowel alliteration more conservatively than Milton, has still an evident fondness for it. An examination of certain of Tennyson's poems gives the following results: *In Memoriam*—Number of stanzas, 750; stanzas showing vowel alliteration, 80; percentage, 10.6. *Locksley Hall*—Number of couplets, 97; couplets showing vowel alliteration, 13; percentage, 13.4. *Palace of Art*—Number of stanzas, 74; stanzas showing vowel alliteration, 15; percentage, 20.2. *The Two Voices*—Number of stanzas, 154; stanzas showing vowel alliteration, 27; percentage, 17.5. In the *Battle of Brunanburh*, where Tennyson aims to reproduce the alliterative effect of the original, there are 15 vowel-alliterating lines out of a total of 125. The longer poems, as the *Princess* and the *Idyls of the King*, as far as I have examined them, show a smaller percentage.

Many of Tennyson's most characteristic effects are secured by means of this kind of alliteration, as

The warrior *Earl of Allendale*  
He loved the *Lady Anne*.  
(*The Foresters*, Act I.)  
I never ate with angrier appetite.  
(*Geraint and Enid*.)  
To dying ears when unto dying eyes,  
(*The Princess*.)  
And all the phantom, Nature, stands—  
With all the music in her tone,  
A hollow echo of my own,—  
A hollow form with empty hands.  
That all, as in some piece of art  
Is toil co-operant to an end.  
(*In Memoriam*.)

That these collocations of initial vowel sounds are the result not of chance but of design is apparent from the instances in which they are artfully conjoined in the same line or group of lines with alliterating consonants. Consider Tennyson's line, "*I the heir of all the ages in the foremost files of time*" (*Locksley Hall*), or "*Author, essayist, atheist, novelist, realist, rhymester, play your part*" (*Locksley Hall Sixty Years After*), or "*Is there evil but on earth? or pain in every peopled sphere?*" (*Ibid.*), or "*Round as the red eye of an eagle-owl*"

(*Gareth and Lynette*). It seems clear that in each of these cases the vowel alliteration in one half of the line is intended to balance the consonant alliteration in the other half.<sup>3</sup> Nor are there lacking examples of crossed alliteration, as in

Ancient founts of inspiration well through all my  
fancy yet. (*Locksley Hall*.)

From these instances we may fairly conclude that the poet has treated alliterating vowels precisely as he has treated alliterating consonants.

There is the possibility, however, that those who think these lines are genuinely and effectively alliterative deceive themselves, and that the effects are really due to what Professor Saintsbury calls vowel music. We must therefore examine the latter term for a moment and distinguish it from vowel alliteration.

Vowel music (or, better, vowel melody) is a quasi-tune resulting from an artful sequence of vowel sounds. It is composed of several factors, of which may be mentioned (1) the natural difference of pitch of the vowels, which enables one to arrange them in a sort of scale; (2) the differences in vowel quality due to overtones; (3) the association of certain vowel sounds and sequences of vowel sounds with corresponding emotional states; (4) the kinesthetic effect due to the muscular action involved in shifting from one position of the vocal organs to another.

The presence of these factors gives a distinctly melodic effect that is often pleasing to the ear. Moreover, this melody usually corresponds in a delicate and subtle fashion to the sequence of moods and images that the poem is intended to arouse. Thus, to take a simple instance, the sequence ee-aw frequently has a suggestion of humor, as in "see-saw," "fee-

<sup>3</sup> Compare Browning's

Armies of angels that soar, legions of demons that  
lurk. (*Abt Vogler*.)

The same device on a larger scale is seen in Milton's lines (*Paradise Lost*, i, 371-373):

Of to the image of a brute, adorned  
With gay religions full of pomp and gold,  
And devils to adore for deities.

faw-fum," "Jimmie McGee McGaw," and the like. Here the effect may be traced to the sudden shifting from the high-front-unrounded to the low-back-rounded position, together with the lowering in pitch; though association with the "hee-haw" of the ass's horrible bray doubtless plays a part. At all events, through the operation of such factors as these the poet, by deftly arranging the vowel sequences, may consciously or unconsciously compose an elaborate vowel melody. To the examples cited by Professor Saintsbury may be added Tennyson's "I alone awake," with its lovely minor cadence, and Milton's

Death  
Grinned horrible a ghastly smile,

where the vowels seem to execute a kind of *danse macabre* as an accompaniment to the hideous imagery.

None of these factors, however, resemble, except remotely, the factors of alliteration, consonantal or vocalic. While vowel melody is in general a series of disparates, alliteration, like rhyme, is essentially repetitive. Its characteristic and indispensable feature appears to be the repetition of an identical sound at the beginning of a word or syllable.

But if all alliteration is a repetition of an initial sound, what can it be in such a phrase as "Apt alliteration's artful aid" that actually alliterates? Clearly, it is not the quality of the vowel, for that shifts with each word in the sequence. What common element then is left? To answer this question we may bring forward two alternative theories: (1) that the recurrent element is simply the sonority of the initial vowel; (2) that the recurrent element is a sound that is not represented in the spelling of the word, but is nevertheless always present at the beginning of it, namely, the glottal catch.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>The theory of Axel Kock, that all vowel alliteration in old English poetry was originally a repetition of the same vowel, need not concern us here, for identical vowel alliteration in modern English poetry is so rare as to be almost negligible. In the 10,565 lines of *Paradise Lost* there are but 10 cases of identical alliteration within the line, barring repetitions of the same word.

The sonority theory assumes that, in spite of the great difference in the position of the vocal organs in pronouncing the different vowel sounds, there is a common element in these sounds which so powerfully impresses the ear that any vowel or diphthong appears to be a repetition of any other vowel or diphthong. When we ask what this element is, some difficulty is found in framing a satisfactory reply. Sonority, as Classen has pointed out, is only a phonetic abstraction. It is present in consonants as well as vowels, and, unfortunately for the theory, sonorous consonants do not alliterate with vowel sounds in the slightest degree. The embarrassing question may also be asked, Why, if all vowels alliterate with one another because of their vocality, should not all consonants alliterate with one another by virtue of their consonantality?—and to this question there is as yet no answer.

The second theory, that of the glottal catch, though it has not before been applied, so far as I am aware, to modern poetry, seems a happy solution of the difficulty. The glottal catch is simply the pressing together or overlapping of the vocal cords in such a way as to effect a complete stoppage of the breath. It is heard in an extreme form in coughing or clearing the throat or in pronouncing that expletive which we spell awkwardly *ahem*, but in its simplest form it is the starting point of every initial vowel that is uttered with emphasis. In order to secure what the singer calls "attack," that is, the launching of the vowel with full force, it is necessary, in all highly emotional expression, to pen up the breath behind the glottis and then force the glottis open with a kind of explosion. As Jespersen says (*Lehrbuch der Phonetik*, p. 78), the glottal catch is "the way in which everybody naturally begins a vowel when he speaks with a certain effort, as, for example, when he takes especial pains to imitate the vowel sounds of a foreign language." In some languages the glottal catch is an essential element of speech. Among the North Germans all accented initial (and many accented internal) vowels are normally preceded by it.

In England the initial glottal catch is said by Jespersen to be wholly unknown, and Sweet

regards it as a significant mark of difference between English as spoken in England and the German of North Germany. Although I hesitate to set my poor observations against those of two so eminent phoneticians, I shall venture the assertion that a quite unmistakable glottal catch may be heard in the speech of almost every Englishman when he speaks with energy or abruptness.<sup>5</sup> There is a well-known story which I may use to illustrate the contention. An American and an Englishman are traveling in a third-class carriage in England together with a woman and her child. It is lunch time, and the boy says to his mother, "Maw, give me some 'am." "'Am," replies the mother, scornfully, "you mustn't say 'am, you must say 'am." When they get out at the next station, the Englishman, who has been holding himself in with difficulty, bursts into a guffaw. "She thought she was a-sayin' 'am and she was only a-sayin' 'am." I have heard several Englishmen tell that story and in each case, if my ears did not deceive me, the supposedly more refined pronunciation was distinguished by a glottal catch.

Throughout America the glottal catch is fairly common in ordinary speech. It is used by every American when he is tired, and in the Middle West it is an almost invariable accompaniment of stressed initial vowels. In my classes in the University this year there is no student who does not use it freely and noticeably in forcible or excited speech. One student from Detroit, with no foreign influence in the family life, uses it at the beginning of every

initial vowel, and of many internal vowels, precisely as does a North German.

If we grant the presence of the glottal catch in sufficient measure to gratify the ear of poet and hearer, and its use consciously or unconsciously as prosodic material, the problem of vowel alliteration is greatly simplified. Vowel alliteration in the strict sense of the term simply disappears and in its place there is a sort of consonant alliteration. However the vowel may be varied, the glottal catch remains virtually the same and supplies the common element essential to all alliterative repetition.

My conclusions are then: (1) that vowel alliteration in the sense of the significant repetition of the same initial vowel sound occurs so rarely in modern English poetry that it may for our present purpose be disregarded; (2) that sonority is too vague and abstract to serve as alliterative material, though it may act as a reinforcement; (3) that vowel melody, although it is an important prosodic phenomenon, is wholly distinct in its means and effects from alliteration; and, finally (4) that the alliterative effect of initial vowels may be due to the repetition of the glottal catch, which, either as a sound or as an innervation of the muscles contracting the glottis, is probably present in some degree before all vowels that are pronounced with feeling or energy.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. L. P. H. Eijkman's "Notes on English Pronunciation" in *Die Neueren Sprachen*, xvii, 443, and Daniel Jones's comment, *Ibid.*, p. 571. Eijkman and Jones agree that the glottal catch is not uncommon in normal English speech, and the former quotes the letter written by Lloyd to Viëtor in 1894 (Viëtor, *Elemente d. Phonetik*, § 30, Anm. 5): "I have not noticed any specific substitution of 'glottal catch' for a dropt *h*; but I do notice that 'clear beginning,' sometimes forcible enough to be called 'glottal catch,' exists largely in England in certain positions, e. g. (a) when another vowel, especially a very similar vowel, precedes—(b) when a strong emphasis is intended. A speaker laboring under suppressed passion uses unconsciously the 'clear beginning.'"

## NOTES ON MÉRÉ

Seldom has the identity of a writer been so difficult to establish as has that of Antoine Gombaud, chevalier de Méré. Confused even during his own lifetime with a contemporary, the marquis de Méré, chevalier de Saint-Michel, the writer Méré was in the eighteenth century adorned with the latter's patronymic appellation and enshrined as George(s) Brossin in historical and bibliographical dictionaries, cyclopedias, general biographies, and histories of